

**Execution of the Russian Empire's strategic objectives in
Circassia**

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Abstract

The Caucasus and its conquest are the subject of the most writings about Russian colonial expansion in the 19th century. The writers, historians, journalists, military experts, contemporaries, and others were writing about the war. Research on the issue is still being done extensively because it is relevant nowadays (History of the Caucasus, 2023:93).

According to V. Lapin, the war for the conquest of the Caucasus began at Peter I's campaign in the Caspian Sea and lasted more than 150. The Russian military historian General - Major R. Fadeyev considers that, the war began in 1801, when Russia abolished the Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom and joined Eastern Georgia. This meant the start of the empire's boundary extension and the conquest of other Caucasus lands. The Caucasian War, according to some Soviet and contemporary Russian historians I. Gordin, M. Bliev, V. Degoev, N. Sladkova, etc., was from 1817 to 1867. It continued until the end of

Circassian organized resistance. This date is more or less understandable, since it was precisely to this period that the process of military actions in the North Caucasus was mainly confined, ending with the inclusion of the Caucasus into the Russian Empire (History of the Caucasus, 2023:93-94). In this article, we will focus on Circassia.

Keywords: North Caucasus; Circassia; Russian Empire; exile.

Introduction

The Russian Empire's war in the North Caucasus in the 19th century (1817-1864) was determined by the following factor: Russia could not fully establish control over the Caucasus without strengthening its influence in the North Caucasus. The Caucasus had to be fully integrated into a single socio-cultural and economic space. Which would bring the stable economic benefits to the Russian Empire. The first stage of the conquest of the Caucasian section of the Silk Road was the treaty with the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti (1783). Apparently, in the long term, the imperial court planned to protect and develop the aforementioned road, as well as to preserve it. The establishment of a stable situation in the Caucasus, which was disturbed by frequent strife and wars, was to lead to its strengthening, revival, and development. Georgia, situated south of the Caucasus Mountains, would have played a role in the growth of trade, culture, diplomacy, and economic relations between Europe and Asia (Gureshidze, 2021: 55). In order to unite the entire Caucasus into a single political, socioeconomic, and strategic framework, the war in the North Caucasus became an unavoidable necessity after the following annexation of Georgia. The article looks at the deportation of the Circassians and the Russian Empire's interests in the region.

Methods

The work weaves together a number of historical occurrences, the study of which paints a whole picture. I have given an analytical

analysis based on processed archive records and the published works of several scientists.

Discussion

The Caucasus is one of those regions of the world where the interests of many states intersect. Establishing control over the Caucasus as a bridge that connects the East and the West meant gaining a significant advantage over rival states. This space was always an arena of wars, conflicts, and confrontations. The Caucasus's peripheral location in respect to both the Eastern and Western worlds is a zone of contact for various religions, civilizations, and cultures, which is one of its most notable features (History of the Caucasus, 2023:15). Peter I aimed to establish a trade route to India by the Persian Empire along the western shore of the Caspian Sea (Dubrovin, 1866:6). That's why the Russian Empire wanted to take over Circassia in order to accomplish this.

The Circassians or Circassian people, also called Cherkess or Adyghe are a Northwest Caucasian ethnic group and nation who originated in Circassia, a region and former country in the North Caucasus. Circassians are Sunni Muslims. Circassia did not depend on anyone and accepted the patronage of the Crimean Khan. When the Crimean Khan Qaplan-Giray wanted to force the Kabardin province to bring him more slaves in 1723, the people engaged in a brutal struggle and wiped off the Tatars (5,000 died on the battlefield) the Khan barely made it out alive after war. Numerous honorable Tatars lost their lives throughout the struggle. Kabardino sought assistance from the Moscow Tsar after failing to obtain backing in other provinces, and the Bey offered him his own son as a hostage. Later, the Bey's son became a Christian. The remaining regions of Circassia opposed Kabardino and sided with the Crimean Khan (Veidenbaum, 1893:10-12). The faith of Circassia and its individual provinces was mixed: they distinguished the days - Saturday, Sunday, and Friday. They celebrated

Easter with the Christians and Bayram³⁹ with the Turks. They did not observe the fast among the Christians, but among the Turks they confirmed their Turkishness; they behaved in exactly the same way towards other religions (Veidenbaum, 1893:17). Therefore, I suppose that the Circassians preferred the Turks or were heavily influenced by them. It is noteworthy that in the 14th-15th centuries, the Circassians were considered Christians. Christianity spread from Byzantium and Georgia in the 10th-12th centuries but did not become the dominant religion. The strengthening of Christianity was hindered by Islam, which began to penetrate the Northwestern Caucasus in the 14th century. Despite the strong influence of Islam, traces of ancient pagan beliefs and Christianity remained among the Circassians until the 20th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries, some Circassian tribes worshiped the cross (Topchishvili, 2007:52). As for the relations the Georgian and Adyghe peoples, the Georgian-Adyghe cooperation continued until the turn of the 18th-19th centuries. The descendants of Erekle II enjoyed great respect among the Adyghe nobility. Circassians had close and friendly relations with the last king of Kartli-Kakheti, the former bride of the Circassian prince George XII (Javakhishvili, 2005:156). In the first half of the 19th century, Karachay-Cherkessia became part of Russia. In 1868, serfdom was abolished (kartuli sabch'ota entsik'lop'edia, 1986:629). The territory known today as Circassia was inhabited by the ancestors of the Adyghe in the 5th-7th centuries. In modern Circassia, the migration of the Adyghe and Beslan people to the Kuban plain occurred in the 12th-13th centuries. In the 19th century, due to the colonial policy of Tsarist Russia, the Kabardians migrated in to Circassia. Their migration ceased in 1825. By this time, the Kabardians had already founded 62 aul on the territory of Circassia (Topchishvili, 2007:51). Circassians believed that their districts in

³⁹ Ramadan Bayram, also known as Eid al-Fitr, which Turks often refer to as Şeker Bayramı, or the holiday of sweets, is upon us. Ramadan Bayram is a celebration of the end of a trying month of fasting for the Holy Month of Ramadan. <https://www.dailysabah.com/expat-corner/2019/06/04/all-about-ramadan-bayram-the-sweetest-of-holidays> 2/25/2025 1:44

Crimea had existed since the time of Genoese rule. Some family names were of Frank (Latin: Franci) origin. There is an opinion that the Circassian language resembled a broken Italian. All their customs were close to the Frank (Latin: Franci) ones. There were several churches in the country with incomprehensible inscriptions. Crosses were depicted on ancient tombs and resemble the Latin cross (Veidenbaum, 1893:14).

After the end of the Crimean War (1853-56), the Russian government stepped up its offensive in the Caucasus. Various plans were developed to quickly end military actions and "pacify" the rebellious highlanders. The essence of these plans boiled down to the expulsion of the Circassians living in Western Circassia from the Black Sea region to the Kuban, Don, or the Ottoman Empire. This is evidenced by the Report of the Chief of the General Staff of the Caucasian Army, General D. A. Milyutin (proof of the resettlement of Circassians to the Don), and the reasoned statement of the Commander of the Right Flank of the Caucasian Line and the Black Sea Troops, General N. Ya. Evdokimov (the deportation of Circassians to Turkey). From the end of 1858, the issue of deportation of Circassians living in the western part of Circassia was discussed in diplomatic correspondence between the Russian and Turkish authorities. The Black Sea coast of the Circassian region was one of the main areas to fight against the Russian Empire and was supplied with military equipment, ammunition, emissaries, various household items, etc. I think that the Black Sea region of Circassia, due to its strategic importance, could have become a springboard for other states during the war with Russia. According to military historian and commander of the royal army R. A. Fadeyev: "There is a fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western Caucasus: Circassians, having a strategic position on the Black Sea coast, could in no way be firmly attached to Russia." In peacetime, it took a protracted, costly, and brutal struggle to subjugate the people of Kuban to the Russian authority. They will, however, strike Russia as soon as the conflict starts, and ten districts of Kuban will become opening for the

enemy to enter the very center of the Caucasus." (<https://www.adygi.ru/index.php?newsid=1276306.04.2020>).

The Circassians wanted complete freedom and independence in order to preserve and protect their way of life and customs. That's why they opposed the expansion of the Russian Empire, which England and the Ottoman Empire used in their geopolitical interests. The archival materials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs present: on June 12, 1829, a Turkish-Greek ship sailing from Trebizond was captured at the coast of Circassia, carrying salt, iron, copper boilers, various simple Turkish paper goods, and military ammunition. With five small barrels and two clay pots full of gunpowder, three hundred 6-pound shells, and two pounds of live ammunition, the ship had a crew of 11 people on board. The detainees stated that another Turkish ship was being prepared in Trabzon under the command of Arif-Reyzin to deliver the ammunition to the mountaineers (The Georgian SSR Ministry of Internal Affairs' Archival Department. 1953:26-27). Also notability is the report that in 1831, according to the statement of the Turk Mustafa Kashnilak oglu, a two vessel that entered Constantinople from Ual-Village, located between Sundzukale and Gelendzhik, loaded a significant amount of gunpowder, lead, and iron. Russian Generals believed that allowing ships to enter the Highlanders shores inevitably would bring human trafficking, which completely resisted the Russian state's will (The Georgian SSR Ministry of Internal Affairs' Archival Department. 1953:26-27). Interesting information is about the ties of English agents and the Circassians (1834). Archival documents indicate that two Englishmen and a Turkish interpreter who accompanied them traveled on the ship and met with local nobility in the house of the Circassian merchant Ali-Shabadz. They conveyed greetings from the famous traitor Safar-bey and the message that he would meet with the Circassians after a month. Then the Englishmen, together with these noblemen, went to Astagai, 40 miles from Anapa, "where they met with approximately 150 inhabitants of the Natukh tribe" (The Georgian SSR Ministry of Internal Affairs' Archival Department. 1953:49-50). In a

message from Baron Rosen to the State Vice-Chancellor Nesselrode, the anti-Russian efforts of Safar Bey and his Anglo-Turkish superiors were mentioned; in particular, Safar Bey sent out letters and appeals, inciting the highlanders to revolt. He also assured them that the Egyptian Pasha, the Sultan, England, and France would send troops to help them. In one of the messages sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the following fact is mentioned: "Two travelers, an Englishman and an Italian, set off from Trebizond with the intention of exploring the Russian Empire's borders and infiltrating the highlands" (The Georgian SSR Ministry of Internal Affairs' Archival Department. 1953: 84). The reports that French consuls submit to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs are also worth mentioning because they offer a more tangible depiction of the previously mentioned facts. In the report, in particular, mentioned that the Russians managed to build a fairly large road. To make the large-scale maneuver to unify with the Circassians, which would be joined the part of Kabardino (Мамуля, 2022:284-285). From a secret report (1837) the following fact is revealed: according to a secret order of Vice-Admiral Lazarev, commander of the Black Sea Fleet and ports, English schooners, and especially the schooner Wizard (skipper Lovey), were not allowed to go out to sea to establish trade relations with the mountaineers. At the same time, one Englishman made a flag for the Circassians, which was to be given to them in Constantinople for use during the general uprising (The Georgian SSR Ministry of Internal Affairs' Archival Department. 1953:107). It is notability that England never lost interest in the North Caucasus and had its own plans even in 1918. In particular, Haydar Bamat, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Mountaineers Republic, travelled to Switzerland to initiate diplomatic efforts aimed at securing support from England and France (Batsikadze, 2024:223).

On October 3, 1860, the leading Russian commanders in the Vladikavkaz region met and decided on a new plan of action to combat Circassians. The main essence of the plan was to drive the Circassians from the mountains to the plain and eventually then to the Ottoman

Empire. Also, the Russian Empire wanted to settle the Cossacks on these territories. This plan was written by General N. Ya. Evdokimov, who committed to carrying out the plan in two to three years. (<https://www.adygi.ru/index.php?newsid=12763> 2020 16:15).

Recall the remarks made by the Russian Emperor at his September 11, 1861, meeting with the Abazdekhs: *"I have come to you as a good friend, not as an enemy. I want those people to live in their homelands and to coexist peacefully and amicably with us. Russia is a great state that has big tasks. We need to strengthen our borders and connect the seas to reach other countries. Our trade with other countries must be carried out by sea... Therefore, we cannot exist without the Black Sea. We propose that you give us permission to build three roads to the Black Sea through your lands: to Anapa, Novorossiysk, and Tuapse. My treasury will pay compensation to those villages that will have to be resettled from the areas where the road will be built. Your national identity will not be taken away from you. You must accept your subordination to the Russian Tsar. You will continue to live and govern in accordance with your traditions, your religion will be unassailable, and no one will meddle in your domestic affairs. You will select the members of the judicial and administrative branches. You have fought bravely for many decades, but your best people are dying, despite decades of valiant fighting, you are unable to maintain your freedom because to the size and might of my army. The conclusion is clear: There is no excuse for additional fatalities. If you halt the harmful strife, your people will live better and survive. As the Russian government protects your interests and protects you from enemies, wounds will heal, hostility will decrease, and grievances will be forgotten. In fifty years, you will live in a state with equitable laws."* (Kvitsiani, 2015:41-42). On September 18, 1861, a historic meeting of the Circassian delegation with the Russian Emperor Alexander II took place. The delegation's request was to stop military actions, the destruction of villages, and the resettlement of Cossacks. The Emperor gave a categorical answer: "Deportation either to the specified place or to

Turkey." After this, all requests from the Circassians from Tsarist Russia were answered negatively (<https://www.adygi.ru/index.php?newsid=12763> 2020 16:30). The Ottoman Empire was likewise interested in deporting the Circassians to resupply its understaffed army with exiles, which ran parallel to Russian goals. This was done to make the empire more capable of combat. Envoys from the Ottoman Empire launched an agitation campaign in order to achieve this. The Circassians were demagogically reassured by proclamations issued in the Sultan's name that homes had been constructed on the best lands allotted to them. Circassians were mostly transported on Russian and Ottoman ships since the Russian government forbade their resettlement by land across the Caucasus.

The Circassian people experienced a painless migration. The winter cold, starvation, and infectious diseases (typhoid and plague) killed many of the Circassians who had congregated along the shore for deportation (1863–64). On the route, some people perished. Turkish shipowners put 200–300 people aboard a ship that was intended for 50–60 persons in order to increase revenues. There was a food shortage as a result. Overcrowding and poor weather caused numerous vessels to sink in the fall and winter. Criminal violations were also committed, such as forcing exiles onto flimsy ships that would eventually sink. (<https://www.adygi.ru/index.php?newsid=12763> 2020 17:17). In 1864, the Russian tsarist authorities eventually deported the Circassians who were living in Western Circassia. For the Ottoman government, an officer named Salaheddin Bey collected data on the deportation of the Circassians. According to his research, there were 595 thousand Circassians living in the Ottoman Empire in 1867. The estimated 100,000 or more Circassians who died during the 1863–1864 deportations are not mentioned in official sources (<https://www.adygi.ru/index.php?newsid=12763> 2020 20:56).

Conclusion

A group of Circassians petitioned the European Parliament in 2006 to acknowledge the Circassian genocide that occurred during the

19th-century conflict. Since the Russian Federation's State Duma rejected the genocide in 2005, a similar petition was made to Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation. Notably, Karachay-Cherkessia has been celebrating the Day of the Victims of the Caucasian War on May 21 every year since 1994. Additionally, a resolution acknowledging the Circassian genocide was voted by the Georgian Parliament on May 20, 2011. This step of the Georgian parliament was preceded by the following event: on March 20-21, 2010, a conference dedicated to the peoples of the North Caucasus was held at Ilia State University, in which various delegates took part, including those from the American Jamestown Foundation. I assume the Georgian Parliament's recognition is a logical step toward gaining the support of the Circassian Diaspora in Jordan against counterbalancing to the Abkhaz lobby. The declaration of independence from the Mountaineers Republic on May 11, 1918, stated that the southern border would be determined through negotiations with the Transcaucasian government. It was evident that the independence of the mountaineers and their friendly relations with Georgia were closely intertwined (Batsikadze, 2024:222).

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